

the Path of Joy

Publisher: Buddhist Research Society, 2 & 4 Lorong 24A Geylang Singapore 398526
Printer: Citi Print & Design Pte Ltd, 10 Ubi Crescent, Ubi Techpark #03-34 Singapore 408564



EIGHT KINDS OF FEAR

I want to talk about fear. Fear is an emotion, a negative emotion. Some people experience more fear, others less. But fear is something that everyone experiences.

Sometimes, people want to hide their fear. But fear is not something we can hide or escape from. When we try to hide it, we develop more fear.

On the other hand, we can see people who have serious health problems, yet show a lot of courage by trying to lead a normal life and to avoid bringing their fear to others. With courage they face their health problems. This shows that if we want to overcome fear of disease, it can be done, at least up to a certain point.

The 4th kind of fear is fear of death. We carry this fear from the beginning of life to the very end. We do many things to forget about it. In our whole life, we try to forget about death. But even if we can forget it, there's no way to escape it. Even if we do things to enjoy life, death will surely come.

These fears mentioned by the Buddha are common to everyone. Why do we need to think about them? Because the more we try to forget them, the more we fear. The Buddha's advice is to take those things as part of the reality of life. We have a life to live. We have many important things to do. When we reflect that old age, sickness and death can happen at any time, we realise that our life is precious. It's short and precarious and thereby even more precious, not less. Within this short life span, we have to make our life a meaningful one. If we can lead a meaningful life morally or spiritually, a life that can benefit ourselves and others, we don't have to develop any fear.

Bhante Says

In one discourse, from the Book of Gradual Sayings (*Anguttara-Nikaya*), the Buddha mentioned 8 types of fear.

The 1st kind of fear is fear of birth. Inside the womb, a baby exists in fear and pain. The mother's feelings affect the baby. Whatever the mother eats affects the baby. Birth can also bring fear to the baby as it is suddenly thrust into a totally unknown and frightening environment.

The 2nd type of fear is fear of old age. I have met many people, who, when they observe how old people suffer, how the elderly ones' activities slow down as they become weaker and weaker, worry that their turn will soon come. As a result, they develop fear.

Of course, no one thinks that old age is a good thing. We can see for ourselves the disadvantages of old age. But, even as we approach old age, we don't make an effort to see it as an inevitable fact. As a result, we develop fear.

Fear of disease is the 3rd kind of fear mentioned by the Buddha. Fear of disease is a common thing. We all like to be in good health. We're prepared to do anything to be in good health. Sometimes, we even go beyond our capacity to overcome disease. That's why the health and fitness industry is a multi-million dollar industry.

But as long as we do not or refuse to understand the reality of change, that very change induces fear. If we understand the process of ageing (as a natural phenomenon) at least up to a certain level, we can reduce our fear. On the other hand, if we try to ignore reality and hope that we can remain forever in good health, our fear will be greater when we inevitably in time face health problems.

' The important thing is to understand that old age, sickness and death are natural processes common to everybody. There's no reason to fear them. If we can accept them gracefully, our life will be a happier one. '

I'm not suggesting that you should perform a serious kind of Dharma practice. You may not have time to go for meditation retreats lasting weeks or months. You certainly are not in a position to renounce the world and lead a monk's life. But as lay people, you can still think of a simple way to lead a good life. What is a good life in

Buddhist terms? You lead a good life if you refrain from doing anything harmful to yourselves and others. Being harmless to ourselves is not good enough. Being harmless to others is also not enough. We have to be harmless to both ourselves and others.

A young lady recently asked me a question. Her grandmother, a lady I've known for 25 years, has led a very religious life. She was a vegetarian throughout her life. She practised right livelihood by selling fruits and vegetables. She visited temples regularly, chanted, went on pilgrimages, travelled to many religious places. But now in her twilight years, she has serious medical problems. She's losing her memory. She has difficulty walking. She has to sit in a wheelchair. And so her granddaughter wonders - *How can this happen to my grandmother, such a good, kind and generous person?*

I can't give a definite answer to this kind of question. It's tempting to say that the old lady is reaping the results of her bad karma in the past. But this answer is a very cruel one. I never want to answer the question in that way. How do I know that she led a bad life in the past? If I say it's because of her bad karma, that's a horrible thing to say. I don't see things in that light.

Whether you have done good or bad things in the past is not a crucial factor in trying to overcome this kind of fear. We cannot avoid old age because of that. If you read the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* - the Buddha's last sermon - you can see that his last journey from Sravasti to Kushinagara was long and difficult. He had to stop at many places. Sometimes, he was so tired, almost fainted. Wherever possible, he sat and drank water. That is how he completed his journey before he died. Old age had caught up with him.

Our body is a kind of machine. It can last for a certain period. When we reach a certain age, our body will slowly get weaker and weaker. Whether we're good or bad is a different thing. Of course, many bad people may die earlier. If they commit crimes, someone may kill them. Or if they develop bad habits like taking drugs, they may die from that habit. The effect will come. But even if we do not do such things, we cannot stop ageing or health problems.

The important thing is to understand that old age, sickness and death are natural processes common to everybody. There's no reason to fear them. If we can accept them gracefully, our life will be a happier one.

In the sutra, the Buddha mentioned another 4 types of fear, very common in our daily life. The first 4 types of fear - of birth, old age, sickness and death - are related to the reality of this world and so cannot be overcome so easily. Although quite common, these fears in the 2nd group are easier to overcome.

The 1st kind of fear in the 2nd group is fear of fire. In Singapore, most people live in flats. People who live in flats need to be specially careful when dealing with fire. They need to consider the safety of not only themselves but their neighbours. We can avoid fear of fire by being more considerate, mindful and compassionate.

The 2nd kind of fear is fear of water. It's very easy to understand this in terms of the tsunami. There are some children who even today are afraid to go to the sea. But water is essential for life. We cannot survive without it. It's one of the 4 elements. As a form of energy, it can be constructive or destructive. If we're able to handle it carefully, it won't bring fear.

Fear of *rajas* (meaning king or government) is the 3rd fear. If we have a good government, we are blessed. Singaporeans have less fear because they always think that the government will take care of everything for them. In some countries, people feel that no matter how hard they work, the government takes away everything. In other countries, revolutions or rebellions can happen. And so it's true what the Buddha said. That living in a suitable locality is indeed a blessing.

Fear of bandits is the last kind of fear. If you think of places

like Africa where people live in war zones caught between warring factions, you can see clearly what this implies.

These are the 8 types of fear mentioned by the Buddha. But there can be countless types of fear. Nowadays, people suffer from more kinds of fear. Some of these fears like fear of bird flu was unheard of in olden days. Actually, it's difficult to say whether bird flu existed in those days. But people never heard of it. And if it happened in one country, it was not likely to spread to another or even from one part to another part of the same country. Nowadays, however, news, especially bad news, travels fast and this may enhance our fear.

Fear is negative, whether speaking in a physical or spiritual sense. So we have to make the effort to overcome fear and keep our mind free from fear. The basic way to do this is to lead a harmless life towards ourselves and others and to be more mindful of things around us.

Sometimes, parents plant fear in children's mind to keep them from mischief. It's very easy to plant fear but extremely difficult to remove it. It's better to help children understand the situation rather than make them fearful.

Even in religious fields, some people try to plant fear in people's minds. This is not so good. Some parents complain to me that when their children go to school, the teachers talk to them about hell fire. Unless you believe in a supreme God, you won't be free from hell fire. So the children say that they don't want to face hell fire, they don't want to be Buddhists. This is really a negative thing.

In olden days, people talked a lot about hell. We've seen scenes of hell in Haw Par Villa. How you get tortured when you go to hell. These are very old methods and they can bring negative results. When you try to stop somebody doing wrong things through fear, the effect won't last long. The person may refrain from doing wrong things but that does not mean he's a good or moral person. He just doesn't do it because of fear but actually he still wants to do those things if he can get away with them. Where's the morality? Where's the mental development? Where's the purity?

So when it comes to morality, fear should not be a factor. We can never improve our morality if we abstain from wrong things because of fear.

Instead of fear, what is truly important is right understanding or wisdom. When people are convinced, genuinely convinced, that unskilful acts bring pain and skilful ones bring happiness, they will avoid causing pain and suffering to themselves and others. That is the proper basis for morality. With right understanding or wisdom, fear will not arise. As the Heart Sutra says -

***Without obscurations of mind
(Bodhisattvas) have no fear
Completely transcending false views
They go to the ultimate of nirvana***

Joy

**BHANTE B DHAMMARATANA
RELIGIOUS ADVISOR
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FEAR AND THE VAGARIES OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

In *Bhante Says* this time, Bhante B Dhammaratana explains the 8 kinds of fear taught by the Buddha. Among the 8 fears, 3 of them - the fear of ageing, disease and death - are perennial demons lurking just below the surface of our sub-conscious. Egged on by the relentless march of time, these fears can surface to haunt us at any time.

As it so happened, a few months ago, a series of events seemed to conspire to present me with just such a reminder.

I'd gone alone for a drink at a restaurant near the school where I work. After the drink, I made payment to the proprietor, a friendly Chinese-looking lady who speaks good English. *'How's life?'*, I asked her for want of something to say.

'Oh, business is good,' she responded immediately with a smile. Then, in a quieter, more measured tone, she sighed and added - *'The cook. She's very sick, you know. She has lung cancer.'*

Oh dear! Not that dark, chatty, middle-aged lady who used to smile and greet me with such a hearty *'Sawatdi Kha'* each time I approached the shop! I could still picture her happy face in my mind.

Later, I received an email from a friend. A lawyer by profession, he'd visited the terminally ill sister of a client in hospital to prepare her will. *'How depressing, she's only 36 and looked so young. A mother of 2, she lay there with her eyes staring out of her vacant face. She was so thin that her eyes seemed out of place in her face. And she was so pale like she was short of blood...For us, once we stepped out of the room and the hospital, everything was back to normal. Sun shining and all that. But in my mind, I saw her lying there staring vacantly ahead of her, with all those tubes sticking out of her body.'*

A few days later, my friend wrote again - *'It was only last Wednesday that I visited that lady in hospital but she's now reduced to ashes. She passed away on Saturday and the cremation was on Monday. How fleeting life is!'*

Which brings me to *Dhamma Moments*, a weekly column in the Bangkok Post written by the well-known writer and Dharma practitioner, Danai Chanchaochai. Danai actively promotes vipassana meditation among his family, friends and employees. Employees even get special leave every year to go on meditation retreats.

In a recent article, Danai talked about his driver, Somjit. A well-loved man, Somjit had in the past unfortunately killed a man in a car accident. *'He was an honest person and every time he went to apply for a job, he said that he killed a person in a car accident, so no one accepted him'*. And so Somjit was unemployed for over a year - until he met Danai.

One day, Somjit told Danai - *'Master, I would like to follow you to vipassana meditation next time that you go.'* The driver's spontaneous enthusiasm for meditation impressed his employer and made him extremely happy.

The following Monday morning, Somjit was late for work. *'Normally Somjit was a very punctual person, but that day*

he was running late. I looked at my watch a few times and I was going to push the button to call. Then the call came from Somjit's brother-in-law, and I knew immediately that something bad had happened'. Indeed, Somjit had died in a car accident the night before.

Morbid? Not really. As Bhante says, the Buddha taught us to contemplate death and impermanence for a purpose. He wanted us to realise for ourselves how precious this human life is. And to make good use of the limited time left.

But human nature being what it is, the message does not always come across so well. Even, it seems, in times of great anxiety or fear.

An article in the Bangkok Post in January 2005 is instructive, if a little amusing. It was headlined - *'Tougher economic times mean big business for fortune tellers, as people face an uncertain future.'*

A fortune teller interviewed in the article explained - *'Economic conditions have a certain level of influence over people's psychological condition. Economic uncertainty makes people feel insecure and anxious about their future, and that could prompt more people to seek advice from fortune tellers.'*

Indeed, as a report from the London Times in May 2005, shows, fear can make people act irrationally.

A statue popped up on a beach in southern India, brought by the waves of the tsunami. It's a *'little brass figure with his curious smile, gazing up at the sky'*. An expert identified the statue as that of Jalagupta, a Buddhist sage of centuries past. According to the expert, the statue came from *'Burma, more than 1,000 miles across the sea'* and had been *'mounted on a raft and sent off to sail along coastal villages to bless and protect them from the sea.'*

The local villagers who found the statue, however, had their own ideas. Since only 12 people out of a population of 1,000 died in their village from the tsunami, as contrasted with the devastation in other villages, they decided that the statue had *'saved (them) from death.'* Apparently, none of the villagers had even heard of the Buddha. But no matter. *'It was a gift from God and it came so far to protect us.'* The irony, of course, is that if the villagers had been able to consult the Buddhist sage they worshipped, they would surely have been taught otherwise. That life, human or otherwise, bears 3 universal characteristics, namely, suffering, impermanence and non-self. And no creator God.

All this reminds me of a story that's sometimes related by Tibetan Buddhist monks when they teach. A young Tibetan man decides to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. On learning of this, his aged mother requests him to bring back for her a relic of the Buddha. To humour his mum, the young man agrees.

The day soon arrives when the young pilgrim has to return home. But he has yet to procure a relic of the Buddha for mum. What should he do? As luck would have it, on the way home, he finds an animal bone. It's said that, using her Buddha relic, the old lady practised meditation so fervently that she made great spiritual progress.

True or not, the story does at least serve to illustrate one point. The belief of the villagers in southern India in their precious statue may be misplaced. But, if their newly found gift from God keeps them well, happy and good, some benefit may well accrue from the experience after all. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, has said, for example, that believing in a creator God (who requires his followers to be ethical) is at least better than not believing in anything at all.

Back in Buddhist Thailand, fortune tellers, it seems, are not the only fortunate ones in lean times. A survey indicates that, besides creating job opportunities for talented young star gazers, bad times also tend to induce more people to participate in merit-making (*tum boon*) activities. When people feel threatened, they seek some form of security. If God is not available, then a fat Dharma bank account will

do just as well, thank you very much. A purist may question the motivation of people who 'make merit' for personal gain, financial or otherwise, perhaps even arguing that, in any event, it's an exercise in futility. But at least one thing's for sure. Those at the receiving end of the merit-making activity, be they monks or the lay poor, will at least receive some benefit.

Dr. Peter Della Santina, the well-known Buddhist scholar and a familiar face in BL, once said in an interview with POJ that Buddhism is a great psychology. Indeed.

As always, I wish you pleasant reading. [Joy](#)

Chwee Beng
Editor

Interview

INTERVIEW WITH DHAMMACHARI LOKAMITRA

by Leila



Dhammachari Lokamitra (Jeremy Goody) is the President and Founder of the Jambudvipa Trust (JT) in India and member of the Western Buddhist Order (WBO). JT envisages a society free of caste and other social barriers, in which anyone, whatever his background, can participate fully. Recently, Lokamitra visited BL. This interview concentrates on his work with the untouchables in India.

What made you become a Buddhist? Or were you born a Buddhist?

No. I became interested in Buddhism in the late 60s or early 70s. I was interested in meditation first of all. I did not know much about Buddhism or other religions but Buddhism appealed to me most of all. I started learning.

You were a Christian before then?

I can't say I was a Christian. I was not brought up very strongly as a Christian.

Many people must have asked you this question but I'm going to ask you anyway. What does being a Buddhist mean to you?

It's a very difficult question because I've been Buddhist so long now. I can't imagine life without it. But I think one of the things Buddhism gives to me is a feeling (that) I can be creative in any situation. I don't have to be passive. One can always make the most of the situation.

Give an example.

Any difficulty that arises in oneself, one's personal relationship, one's work - there's always a way forward. This is one of the things the Buddhist teachings has given me.

What about karma?

Karma may be useful in looking at one's present condition but what one does about one's present situation is not karma. It's up to oneself and that is when the change can take place. That's when Buddhism comes in. One is not just passive or reactive to past conditions.

You're a member of the WBO. When did you first get involved in them and why did you join them?

I went to one Buddhist teacher. I did not find it so satisfactory. I was looking for another Buddhist teacher when I came across the WBO. It was actually very near where I was living in north London.

How long have you been working in India?

I went to India in 1977 to visit the Buddhist holy places and also to do yoga. I took some of my yoga students with me. On that visit, I met many followers of Sangharakshita who came into Buddhism through Dr. Ambedkar. I found that the most important part of my stay was actually teaching the Dhamma to the people. Then Sangharakshita encouraged me to continue. So I'm still there.

(Editor - Dr. Ambedkar was the 1st Minister of Law of independent India. He drafted the Indian Constitution. A member of the untouchable caste himself, his conversion to Buddhism encouraged millions of other untouchables to do likewise. Sangharakshita, an English-born former Theravadin monk founded the WBO).

But why India?

Why India? Because basically I found the situation among the new converts so inspiring. I was deeply inspired by the situation, and by the potential of so many people who took Buddhism seriously, that it could have a profound effect on the lives of so many people and on society itself.

I was deeply moved by this. Sangharakshita encouraged

me to stay there and work. That was why I stayed there.

Tell us more about your work with the untouchables in India. What do you do for them?

It's not so much what I do for them but what we've done is communicate the Dhamma as we understand it which links up very much with Dr. Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism. We found people incredibly enthusiastic and wherever we went, we found people starving for 'Dhamma nourishment', as it were.

After Dr. Ambedkar's conversion in 1956, there was very little Dhamma teaching. Very few born Buddhists responded to the situation. So the situation was that millions and millions of people had become Buddhist but (they had) very little effective teachings.

So first of all, we concentrate on basic Dhamma teachings, basic Dhamma study, meditation. Then if they want to go deeper, we take them deeper. Those who want to become members of our order, that too is a possibility. So that's the first thing we do. The other thing is that we run a number of social projects. We've got about 25 hostels and 6 or 7 hospitals.

Poor children from villages affected by death or the tsunami. They come to our hostels in town and there are 10 local schools that give them good food, very psychologically nourishing environments, good places to live. We help them with their studies, with their activities and so on.

We have 80 or 90 community centres, in the slums in different parts of India where we run kindergartens, adult evening classes, medical work, a whole range of activities.

The social work is very much based on the Dhamma. So Dhamma practice is primary.

Where do you get the funds to do this work?

I'm a professional beggar. As a good Buddhist, I have to be a beggar. We get a lot of support from the Karuna Trust in the UK which was founded by Dr. Ambedkar. We get a lot of support from friends in Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea. We get support locally too.

It's never enough because the work is enormous. But whatever we get, we make use of them.

What problems do you encounter in your work?

The caste system is very, very entrenched still in people's minds. People from other castes may be interested in Buddhism but they don't want to join (the untouchables). Even in this modern age. This is one of the difficulties. We're trying to do something about that.

And also it has to be said. Some of them, the converted Buddhists, want to keep Buddhism to themselves. I don't mean within our movement so much but outside. It's the same old past conditioning.

I have encountered so many difficulties just in terms of carrying on working. Corruption is enormous. Red tape is enormous. Lack of co-operation from government is enormous.

We became involved with the untouchables because the relief agencies, especially the government, often discriminate against the untouchables so they often don't get their fair share of relief.

Another problem is that there is so much to do and there are so few to do it. I want to do much more training so that we can train more and more people to do this local business when funds come in. There's a whole sort of vicious cycle over the difficulties. On the other hand, we have been able to do quite a lot.

The people that you train - are they from WBO or the untouchables?

They are from the newly converted Buddhists - the untouchables.

Do they still actually use this term?

No. They're called *Dalits* now.

Why did the untouchables accept Buddhism?

There are a couple of factors. One is that they were being oppressed very badly so they looked for a way out but which way out? They had to find a positive way out. So Dr. Ambedkar who was born an untouchable carefully examined the other major religions as well as communism and came to the conclusion that Buddhism was the way that guaranteed peaceful social change, that stood for the high values in society and supported his principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

How does Buddhism help the untouchables in their daily lives?

I think the main thing is that it gives them a sense of confidence that they're human beings. As untouchables, they were not regarded as human beings. This is the greatest initial benefit, a psychological confidence.

What developments have taken place since the untouchables became Buddhists?

A lot of people are seriously practising Buddhism, trying to understand Buddhism and leaving behind the negative religious practices which made them untouchables, which made them passive. So there's an increasing confidence in the Buddhist community and an increasing sort of enthusiasm for life. Before that, they had no enthusiasm for life. And I think that has grown and the younger generation, we've got some very well-educated people and at the same time, they want to be Buddhists.

If they don't get proper teachings, then I think they may develop strange forms of Buddhism or revert to Hinduism. So we want more and more Buddhist countries to send us books, money and whatever they can do to help us with the training. If there is training then Buddhism has a great chance of reviving (in India).

Do you think that karma is the reason why one is an untouchable?

Let me ask you a question. Take a Brahmin, someone born into the Brahmin caste who's got a good job, who's really

arrogant, can't change. Then you take a Buddhist who comes from a poor background, who has got the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha, who's got a flexible attitude to life, who's got a great attitude to life - tell me who has the good *karma*?

I don't know. It is very difficult thing to say it is karma because one just does not know. No one can say it is because of this or that. It is a dangerous thing to do. Actually, I would say, they are better off than many people.

There are often many other factors.

What would you tell your successor if he were to step into your shoes?

Keep up the training, the Buddha's teachings, keep up the communication, transcend social barriers. It's very important that the Buddhist community thinks as one.

Thank you for this interesting interview, Lokamitra. [Joy](#)

Article

THE VALUE OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION

by Venerable Boralessgamuwe Pamaratana
London Buddhist Vihara



The main aim of Buddhist teachings is to enable us to develop a moral, happy and meaningful life, with a mind which is balanced and restful, remaining calm and still. But how many of us lead a peaceful life or truly understand the preciousness of human life?

Modern education can make us excellent scientists, engineers, doctors and other specialists. It widens our knowledge, sharpens our intellect, and emphasises material welfare. This encourages not only competitiveness, but sometimes also feelings of jealousy and despair. It does not help us to lead the meaningful life that the discipline of thought, speech and action brings to us. To lead a meaningful life, it is essential for us to lead a disciplined life. To achieve a meaningful life, we need to train and guide our mind. This inner transformation will gradually eradicate harmful habits which originate in the mind.

We may ask the question - *What benefit is education and scholarship if it is not accompanied by self-control? Without self-control can life be meaningful?*

There are probably many politicians, scientists and business people who adopt practices that seriously threaten humanity. Today, we can say that the world has been brought to a point of crisis. There is a universal feeling of insecurity, fear and destruction. The only remedy for this state lies in disciplining ourselves, in self-restraint. Without restraint in thought, speech and action, we may become enslaved in immoral activities such as killing, sexual misconduct, taking bribes, over-indulgence in intoxicants and gambling.

On the other hand, life with a good education, complemented by moral behaviour and self restraint, leads us to happiness and contentment, here and in the hereafter.

For every action there is a result. Understanding and heeding the law of *kamma* and *vipaka*, the law of cause and effect, will restrain us from wrongdoing, not only for our own sakes, but for others as well.

We all have to be mindful of what we do or say, keeping in mind the nature of the person, the place and the tension of a situation.

Let's take the case of speech. Words are powerful, and people have been known to kill because of mindless speech. In a situation where tension is high, one should be careful with the use of words. Our speech needs to be not only truthful, but also clear.

If our words are likely to promote or cause conflict, we should not repeat what we have heard even though they may be truthful. We should try to unite those who are divided, and encourage those who are already united. We should avoid harsh words and speak words that are gentle, soothing to hear and loving, coming from and going to the heart. As the Buddha said - *'Concord is pleasure. Concord is delight. Concord is joy. Harmony is the motive of speech.'*

How do we achieve happiness? By watching our minds and attitude, we achieve happiness. With a disciplined mind, we avoid and overcome thoughts of self and pride, greed and attachment, hatred and violence. At the same time with a developed mind, we maintain thoughts of loving kindness, and compassion towards ourselves and all others. When we are involved in a moral struggle, a disciplined mind guards us against reacting. This mindfulness monitors our thoughts, feelings and actions.

Living according to the teachings of the Buddha, with restraint on all the senses, we develop wholesome mental, verbal and bodily actions. By following The Noble Eightfold Path, we gradually develop morality (*sila*) concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*pañña*). We begin to live a joyful life, filled with universal love, compassion, kindness, understanding and tolerance. All this is possible through the practice of Buddhist teachings in Buddhist education.

The Buddha said - *'Kayena samvaro sadhu - sadhu vacaya samvaro. Manasa samvaro sadhu - sadhu sabbattha samvaro.'* This stanza from the *Bhikkhu Vagga* in the *Dhammapada* advises us to be restrained in our thoughts, words and actions. This self discipline leads to our well being and peace of mind, and thus peace in our society. We cannot begin to transform our suffering, until we restrain all our mental, verbal and physical actions.

So let us all try to gradually restrain and transform our thoughts, speech and actions, to experience the highest bliss of *Nibbana*.

May you all attain supreme bliss of *Nibbana*. [Joy](#)

MANY PATHS

by Mark Stevenson

'On every path is the possibility of an extraordinary discovery.'

These words in big print on the back-cover of *'Many Paths'* caught my attention when I was rummaging through 2 boxes of books. I was looking for a book to read and review.

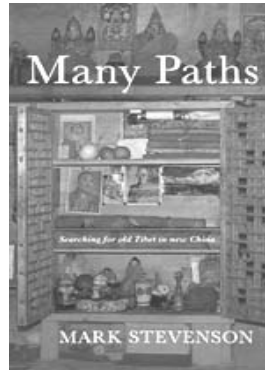
To an avid traveller with a strong liking for adventure like me, these words deserved a second glance. After reading through the gist of the book's contents, I decided to give this book a shot. I was hoping that there would not be too much material on the scientific study of the origin, behaviour and physical, social, and cultural development of humans to bore me. Especially when this was the first time I had plucked enough courage to read a book written by an anthropologist.

The author, a young Australian, was very brave when he decided to embark on a postgraduate research trip into a remote valley of Tibet to uncover the secrets of traditional Tibetan paintings. This, despite the fact that he could not even understand or speak Tibetan when he left Melbourne. To me, this was a bold step towards realizing 2 dreams at one go - obtaining a postgraduate degree in anthropology and gaining an in-depth understanding of traditional Tibetan painting in the hope of learning it from a master painter in Rebkong Valley (in just 2 years!!!). *'Killing 2 birds with one stone'*, so to speak.

2 sets of challenges and uncertainties presented themselves to him the moment he set his mind to do it - the dizzying journey through the treacherous high mountain passes into some of the most remote parts of the world, and getting the right people along the way to connect him to his destination.

On top of that, his original plan to study the Tibetan language at the Sichuan University Tibetan Language class prior to his venture into the valley for the first year didn't materialise. The subject was simply not offered even though it was listed in the handbook. This was only one of the many twists of events that he didn't expect. But his resourcefulness, determination and experience in dealing with the Chinese from one of his earlier trips were always there to push him closer to where he wanted to be.

My earlier reservations about this book turned out to be unfounded. As the Foreword to the book said - *'This story is told with great relish for adventure, a generous open-mindedness and cultural empathy for both the Chinese and Tibetan Cultures. It is also told with great learning, lightly invoked, as Stevenson effortlessly weaves historical, literary*



Published by Lothian Books (2005)
Reviewed by Kok Keong

and political allusions into his narrative.'

In the chapter - *'Wheel of Life'* - the author described the lowest point of his adventures. *'Just my luck, the one night I get stoned out of my mind and there's a cop in my room. I hit the Chinese cop!'* For the first time, I was worried for him. A foreigner hitting a cop in communist China! Unthinkable!

Throughout the book, the author described vividly his near-misses, frustrations, and adventures. Interesting accounts like these kept me wanting to read further although I must admit that some parts of the book were a little too detailed for me.

The author, however, did not forget to provide historical information for an in-depth understanding of Tibet and its culture.

From his interview with painting Master Shawo Tshering, the following excerpt shed some light into the history of the wonderful tradition of Tibetan painting -

'In his soft voice Shawo Tshering summarized what he had been taught about the origins of his tradition. Around the time the Chinese Princess Wencheng was sent to marry the seventh-century Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo, a unit of the Tibetan army was stationed at the present site of Sengeshong. Among the soldiers who settled there, according to local tradition, was one who was skilled in painting. At that time Buddhist art was hardly known in Tibet and was just starting to be imported from India. There was no temple at Sengeshong, only a military garrison. But the association of this village with painting and other arts may go back to that time.'

Being highly involved in the daily running of his good Tibetan friend's *'household'*, the author became very accustomed to the Tibetan way of life. He even described how to make *tsampa*, perhaps the most common instant snack to the people of Tibet.

The modern meditation master, Sogyal Rinpoche, once said that the Dharma is as important to the life of Tibetans as the air they breathe. And so as a Buddhist, I appreciated the words of Buddhist wisdom the author wrote or quoted in the book.

Tibetan lamas often say -

'Death is certain, the time of Death is uncertain.'

These words certainly resonated constantly in the author's mind as his bus crossed the girders used to bridge the gap created as a result of a partial collapse of the road into the deep gorge below. Apparently, they tranquillised his mind, allowing him to stay calm.

The deepest impression I gathered from this book was the author's narration of how well his good friend, Sherab, embodied the 6 perfections - generosity, discipline, patience, vigour, concentration and wisdom.

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'Sherab welcomed everyone to his house with a smile and gave much of his time and hospitality.... Beggars and monastery dogs all got something at Sherab's door. For a while we were visited every day by a sick and mangy bitch about to have pups that came by to have a meal and rest in the sunshine of Sherab's struggling garden...Wherever we walked, Sherab would clear glass and rocks off the street. He didn't hang around watching TV, play pool or go to the movies....He treated men and women with equal politeness... I had heard how Sherab had cared unfailingly for one of his teachers, whom old age had taken over - feeding, washing and walking him every day for three years. Accepting that the world is not designed with our own hopes in mind, he was never pushy.....Cherishing the happiness of others he listened carefully to his fellow villagers when they came to him with their complaints...'

Reading these words made me ashamed of myself by comparison. Sherab is a living example of how a Buddhist

should behave and practise, someone whom we could all well emulate within our own limited capacity. His actions reminded me of what Shakyamuni Buddha instructed his disciples prior to his passing away -

*'He who practises my teaching best serves me.
He who sees the Dhamma sees me.
Transient are all component things.
Strive on with diligence.'*

During his journey, the original path that the author had planned from the start took many twists and turns. Nevertheless, he was able to acquire sufficient data to complete his thesis.

This is an interesting book, especially for anyone who hopes one day to venture into Tibet. [Joy](#)

BL Activities

Seminar on 'Buddhism: Past, Present, Future' [Joy](#)

25 & 26 May 2006



Speakers: Dhammachari Lokamitra, Bhante B Dhammaratana, Prof. Chandima, Bhikkhuni Bodhi



Vesak Day 2006 at the Buddhist Library

12 May 2006

*Joy*

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